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From Johns Hopkins to Beirut, and from Beirut to Columbia: a history of the ‘settler colonialism’ charge

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In this Fathom Long Read, Daniel Szeftel traces the evolution of the settler colonial charge against Zionism through the thinking of Constantin Zureiq and Fayed Sayegh – both academics and diplomats – during the early years of Pan-Arabism. Complicit in collaboration with Nazism, these Arab nationalists reworked their discourse after the war in order to delegitimise Israel in the eyes of international opinion. Although still antisemitic and supremacist, their ideology then underwent a reversal under the banner of settler colonialism: Arab nationalists concealed their own eliminationist intentions and projected them onto Israel.

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All out for Gaza - Author Paul Becker via Wikimedia Commons

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Behind the Hamas terrorists parading in front of the coffins of the Bibas family and Oded Lifshitz, a banner could be seen reading: ‘Zionist Nazism in numbers’. This accusatory inversion is geared towards both demonising Israel and whitewashing Hamas. Hamas is not alone in spreading this narrative – it thrives on American campuses and within international organisations.

This is particularly the case with Francesca Albanese, appointed UN Special Rapporteur on the Palestinian Territories in 2022, who argues that the ‘language used by the Israelis, who say “We are fighting for Western values, to protect you from uncivilized barbarians” echoes the language used during the Second World War with regard to the “other”’ and that Gaza is the ‘the largest and most shameful concentration camp of the 21st century’. For Albanese, this enduring confrontation between a West and an Israel inheriting Nazism and the Palestinian ‘other’ is rooted in the latter’s indigeneity, ‘a painful reminder of Israel’s original sin’. Beyond the religious undertone, the important word here is ‘indigeneity’, because the prism of analysis used by Albanese to arrive at this type of conclusion is the decisive one of ‘settler colonialism’: ‘History shows settler-colonialism is inherently at war with indigenous peoples’. This is a specific kind of colonialism, aimed less at exploitation and domination than at the disappearance of the colonised people, and therefore leads to Nazi-like genocide: ‘Israel’s genocide of Palestinians in Gaza is an escalatory stage of a long-standing settler colonial process of erasure’. Albanese’s discourse doesn’t aim to describe the complex historical and social reality that links and separates the two peoples in Israel and Palestine but is content to use two concepts – the Western colonisers, heirs of Nazism; and the colonised, inherently indigenous – to describe the situation. So, it has all the hallmarks of a militant, ideological discourse.

To shed light on the genesis of this ideology we need to go back to the intellectual revival of Arab nationalism in the 1920s and trace the trajectories of the original thinkers who have been somewhat neglected by historiography, but who nevertheless played a fundamental role in the elaboration, circulation and diplomatic and political effectiveness of this discourse. These include Constantin Zureiq (who coined the term Nakba) and Fayed Sayegh (author of the famous 1974 UN resolution equating Zionism with racism), as crucial protagonists of this global history.

A revival of Arab nationalism based on the reactionary and fascist currents of European and American nationalism

After the fall of the Ottoman Empire, much of Arab nationalism became gradually inspired by reactionary and fascist European authors. This distrust of democratic thought was partly due to the colonial status of the French and English democracies, which led Arab thinkers to turn to Italy and Germany, particularly when these countries fell victim to Fascism and Nazism. This revival of Arab nationalism is most often based on supra-historical conceptions of the nation such as mythological or religious origins and a naturalist and essentialist approach to the nation, closer to the Herderian model than to French civic patriotism.^[1] What’s more, when the Arab nationalism of the ‘20s and ‘40s came to grips with the question of Zionism and the mere presence of Jews in Palestine, it showed a very strong affinity with biological antisemitism and European racial theories.^[2]

The other factor bringing Arab nationalism and European authoritarian ideologies closer together is indeed antisemitism. In

addition to traditional antisemitism in the Muslim world, Christian missionaries had been importing antisemitism since the early 19th century, whether through the network of Orthodox churches led by Tsarist Russia, or American Protestant missionaries. These missionaries found in the arrival of Jews in both the United States and Palestine the opportunity to further spread virulent antisemitism.[3] They were to disseminate it in the schools they created, notably the American University of Beirut, destined to become a major site for the formulation of the ideology we are attempting to analyse. The 1921 article ‘Zionism and the Jewish Problem’ by Episcopalian missionary John Punnett Peters is a perfect illustration of American missions’ antisemitism.[4] For Peters, Jews constituted an ‘unassimilable mass’ and a ‘political and economic threat’, both in the US and in Palestine. Peters also condemned the supposed tendency of Jews to believe themselves ‘a race chosen by God’, to rely on a ‘law of exclusivity’ and to display ‘racial pride’ coupled with ‘religious intolerance’. Peters opposed what he saw as a ‘Jewish invasion’ and advocated an alliance between Christians and Muslims to combat the influx of so many ‘parasitic’ immigrants from Eastern Europe to the Middle East.

An ideological reformulation: Antoun Saadeh’s pan-Syrianism and Constantin Zureiq’s pan-Arabism

The first example of this ideological reformulation of Arab nationalism can be found in Antoun Saadeh. A Lebanese Greek Orthodox Christian, he founded the Syrian Social Nationalist Party in 1932 on his return to Lebanon from Latin America. Although largely an auto-didact, he taught German at the American University of Beirut.

Saadeh’s Syrian Social-Nationalist Party campaigned for a ‘Greater Syria’[5] and was characterised by its fascist style: paramilitary organisational structure, black shirts, cult of the leader, party flag modelled on the Nazi flag. Beyond these characteristics, Saadeh defended the absolutely distinctive character of the Syrian Nation: ‘a group of people with a shared destiny and shared mental-material constituents that distinguishes this group from others’.[6] This distinctive character tended towards purity: Saadeh defended the idea that the Syrian Nation had not suffered ‘any lasting influence from the Arab and then Ottoman conquests’.[7]

When confronted with Zionism and the Jewish question, Saadeh’s exclusivist conception of the Syrian nation revealed its ‘supremacist character’[8]:

The dangerous and large Jewish settlement cannot be reconciled to the principle of Syrian nationalism. It consists of a people who, although mixed with many other peoples, have remained a heterogeneous mixture, instead of a nation. The duty of the Syrian Nationalists is to repulse the immigration of this people with all its might.[9]

Moreover, in an editorial of 1939, Saadeh explained that the Syrian national revival was not complete because of the ‘mental and spiritual illnesses’ of the past, chief among them ‘Jewish particularities’. Saadeh would also develop the idea of Syria’s ‘Jews in the house’, who are not actual Jews, but Syrians opposed to his exclusivist ideal of the nation, and with whom a ‘struggle to the death is engaged’. This discourse is very close to the Nazi idea of ‘Jewification’ (Verjudung)[10]. which would threaten the German nation from within. At the height of Nazism in 1939, Saadeh saw Hitler as the ‘saviour of mankind’[11] for ‘tearing Russia away from Bolshevism and separate it from the democratic countries governed by the Jews’.

Constantin Zureiq is another illustration of this fascist conception of Arab nationalism. Born in Damascus into a Greek Orthodox family, Zureiq too studied at the American University of Beirut before earning a PhD in history at Princeton. He was then appointed Director of the American University of Beirut, and became a regular speaker on American campuses. From the 1950s onwards he was a diplomat, representing Syria at the United Nations and in the United States, and later became director of the Institute for Palestine Studies at the American University of Beirut. In his 1939 first book, National Consciousness[12] – which had a great impact, as he was one of the first to adopt a pan-Arabist perspective – he called for a ‘shared pan-Arab ethnocultural identity’[13] through the emergence of an ‘Arab national religion’, as essentialist and supra-historical as Saadeh’s Syrian nation. He considered the Prophet Mohamed above all as a nationalist leader, and Islam as the main source of his repeated criticism of materialism. Zureiq also draws on Islam as the source of the vitalism necessary to Arab nationalism, which finds expression in the very frequent revival of the idea of the Great Jihad, at once an ‘economic, political and cultural reconquest’ and a call to everyone’s sense of ‘sacrifice’ and ‘responsibility’.[14] Anti-materialism, vitalism, worship of the leader: Zureiq’s Arab nationalism in National Consciousness thus takes the form of a secular religion,[15] like other twentieth-century totalitarianisms.[16] In this book, Zureiq speaks openly of the ‘Jewish race’. Finally, for him too, the examples of a ‘national philosophy’ capable of structuring the national effort he calls for are to be found in ‘Mussolini’s’ fascism and in ‘Fichte, Spengler and Hitler’ for Germany. It was thus by drawing on the sources of fascism and Nazism that he structured his idea of the nation[17].

Intellectual and organisational collaboration between Arab Nationalism and Nazism

Zureiq’s admiration for the Axis powers was reflected in his anti-French, anti-English and pro-German activities during the Second World War. He became president of the Arab Nationalist Party [ANP], a secret pan-Arabist structure active in Lebanon, Syria and Iraq. As early as 1937, prominent members of this party established links with the Nazi authorities to create a pro-German atmosphere in the Arab world, spread Nazi thought and fight against the creation of a Jewish state.[18] During the war, some ANP members were involved in setting up armed sleeper cells to support the German war

effort. Others, who had fled to Palestine to escape the repression organised by France and England, joined forces with the Mufti of Jerusalem to collaborate with Nazi Germany. As a result of this repression, Zureiq himself stepped down as party chairman in 1939, without showing any particular ideological opposition to his party's rapprochements with the Nazis.[19]

As for the Syrian Social-Nationalist Party [SSNP], while their leader was once again sent into exile in Latin America in 1938, many party activists collaborated with the Nazi war effort against the French during the Second World War, leading to dozens of arrests within the party ranks. It was Saadeh's deputy, Fayed Sayegh, who coordinated the party's propaganda effort, including the distribution of pro-German leaflets.[20] Sayegh never left Lebanon during the war but, hunted down by the French authorities for collaborating with Germany, he lived in hiding with Saadeh's Syrian Social-Nationalist Party (SSNP) militants until Lebanon's independence in 1943.[21] Sayegh, who was expelled from the party upon Saadeh's return to Lebanon, nevertheless remained the leading intellectual representative of SSNP ideology after the war. Like Saadeh and Zureiq, he was a Christian, the son of a Presbyterian minister, a denomination established in Lebanon by American missionaries. Like them, he attended the American University of Beirut and then, like Zureiq, obtained a PhD from Georgetown. He went on to teach at the American University of Beirut, as well as in American universities, before founding a structure which competed with Zureiq's Institute for Palestine Studies: the Palestine Research Centre of the PLO. Like Zureiq, he was also a diplomat. From 1950 to 1955, Sayegh worked for the UN and the Arab League. In 1964, he became a member of the PLO's Executive Committee .

The operational contribution of the Arab Nationalist Party and the Syrian Social-Nationalist Party to the Nazi war effort was part of a wider collaboration between Arab nationalists, Islamists and Nazi Germany, designed to implement a little-known part of the Final Solution in the Middle East: the elimination of the Jewish population in Palestine.[22] In the 1930s, the Mufti of Jerusalem, Amin al-Husseini, received financial assistance from the Third Reich to support his Great Revolt against the Jews and the British.[23] In 1941, Hitler even supported a coup d'état against the British mandate in Iraq with a few troops. The Prime Minister who came to power, Rashid Ali al-Gaylani, was a fervent supporter of Nazi Germany. His government did not last 6 months, but it ended with a violent pogrom, the Farhud, prepared by the government at the time on the announcement of the arrival of British troops.[24] At the height of the advance of Rommel's troops, SS death squads were to extend the practice of extermination carried out by Einsatzgruppen to Palestine. As in the Baltic states, they had to rely on local, in this case Arab, auxiliaries.[25] Fortunately, the defeat of Rommel at El-Alamein prevented this project from coming to fruition. Husseini and Gaylani took refuge in Germany until the end of the war.

Reformulating the doctrine of Arab Nationalism after the defeat of Nazi Germany

The defeat of the Nazis left the Arab nationalist movement completely disarmed and delegitimised. As part of a broader intellectual movement accompanying the independence of Arab countries, Zureiq and Sayegh set about modifying its doctrine to transform it into a discourse better suited to convincing Western opinion, which they regarded as decisive for the future of Arab nationalism. To accomplish this, both men enjoyed distinct advantages: close ties with American academia, within certain currents of American Protestantism, within the diplomatic sphere, and within international institutions, all the while remaining firmly rooted in the theoretical debates on Arab nationalism.

This ideological adaptation is the fruit of several euphemistic and accusatory inversions, which we will attempt to analyse on the basis of Zureiq's *The Meaning of the Disaster*,[26] published in 1948. This is the first book in which the word Nakba is used (in this work, the catastrophe is not mainly, as in the contemporary sense, the expulsion of the Palestinians from their land, mentioned only once, but the 'defeat of the Arabs in Palestine', united against the young State of Israel). We will also look at Sayegh's 1958 book *Arab Unity*,[27] and at two lectures he gave in a context of interreligious dialogue in 1946.[28] This preliminary ideological elaboration would eventually lead to Sayegh's decisive book: *Zionist colonialism in Palestine*, published in 1965.[29]

A first reformulation of the Arab nationalist discourse: euphemisation of Nazi references while maintaining anti-Semitism

Despite his recent philo-nazi past, Zureik acknowledged Jewish suffering during the war, only to immediately assign them some responsibility. [30] Zureiq continued to appeal to the old Christian antisemitism, that of supersessionism and Christian primacy over the Holy Land:

The Zionist Jews claim that Palestine is their land, that God promised it to them. Some Christians have been taken in by these claims in view of certain prophecies. But these Christians forget that they, by surrendering to this Jewish claim, surrender the cradle of their religion to a group which has refused it.[31]

Similarly, in 1946, Sayegh pointed to the responsibility of his American Protestant audience for the founding of the State of Israel: 'Israel and the Jewish immigrants who are now pouring into it have taken root in the land of Christ'.[32] Like his former mentor Saadeh and American Protestant missionaries, Sayegh also maintained the antisemitic narrative of Jewish archaism in contrast to Christian novelty: 'the Jewish worldview is a legacy of humiliation, revenge and cultural fossilization of the most primitive kind'.[33]

This Christian antisemitism was matched in this discourse by a much more modern conspiracy fantasy. In his book, Zureiq fantasises global Jewish power over governments as the only possible explanation for the Arab defeat: ‘Zionism is a worldwide net, well prepared scientifically and financially, which dominates the influential countries of the world’.[34] Sayegh would also take up the theme of the struggle between humanity and the Jews in 1946 as he denounced Zionism and Judaism as ‘a danger to Civilization and the Spirit’.[35] Ten years later, in Arab Unity, Sayegh again shared the vision of an omnipotent Zionist network defeating Arab unification projects through ‘the gigantic global forces mobilized by the Zionist Internationale’.[36]

In an accusatory inversion that promised a fruitful future, Zureiq, came to compare Judaism and Zionism with Nazism: ‘how can we accept the view that any one people is the special people of God. The idea of a “chosen people” is closer to that of Nazism than to any other idea’.[37] In 1946, Sayegh also equated Zionism with Nazism, in a direct reference to Hitler’s ideology as he went so far as to denounce the creation of a ‘newly discovered master race at the expense of hundreds of thousands of homeless and destitute Arabs’.[38] This argument immediately became popular in the political discourse of Arab nationalism: In 1962, Nasser did not hesitate to speak of ‘Nazi Zionism’[39] while recruiting the former SS major Johann Von Leers as a political adviser in the Egyptian Information Department.

An initial reformulation of the Arab nationalism of the 30s: insistence on the illegitimacy of the Jewish presence in Israel

The theological illegitimacy of the Jewish presence in Palestine, which stemmed from Christian antisemitism, was gradually replaced by new arguments, destined for a certain posterity, to challenge the Zionist project: from now on, any ethnic, historical or cultural link between the immigrant Jews forming the Yishuv on the one hand and the biblical Hebrew people, once sovereign over the territory of the Holy Land on the other, was to be denied. This argument unfolded in two stages. First, it asserts that Jewish sovereignty over this land was short-lived, and was itself the result of colonisation: ‘The Zionists claim that Palestine is the national home of the Jews because they inhabited it for many generations in the past. The fact is that the Jews infiltrated Palestine in ancient time as other Semitic tribes infiltrated the countries of the Fertile Crescent, but they established a unified kingdom for a limited period.’[40]

More profoundly, Zureiq argued that the Ashkenazi Jews who settled in Israel at that time had no ethnic link with the biblical Hebrew people, being mostly of European origin and descended from a people supposedly converted to Judaism, the Khazars:

In addition, the Zionist Jews who are now immigrating to Palestine bear absolutely no relation to the Semitic Jews. In fact, they are from another stock which is completely different from the Semitic stock. Historians affirm that the great majority of the eastern European Jews trace their origins back to the Khazar tribes who embraced Judaism in the eighth Christian century. Thus, their only bond with the Jews who settled in Palestine in ancient times is religion, which is not a valid basis on which to found a state.[41]

This argument stemmed from old historical works, now strongly contested by the scholarly consensus, as shown by the highly critical reactions of professional historians[42] to the release of the book *The Invention of the Jewish People* by Israeli ‘new historian’ Shlomo Sand.[43]

Zureiq went even further, making the Palestinians the descendants of the original peoples who were finally Arabised:

On the other hand, the Arabs in Palestine represent not only the tribes which migrated from the [Arabian] Peninsula in the seventh century but all the inhabitants, Semites and others (Philistines, Canaanites, Amorites, Aramaeans, etc.) who have come to Palestine one after another since the dawn of history and who were Arabicised in the seventh century and thereafter. Thus, they are the original inhabitants of the country.[44]

For his part, if Sayegh praised the Middle Eastern ‘melting pot’, it was above all because ethnic diversity ultimately disappeared in a ‘process of Arabisation’. This process was described as linguistic, cultural and even racial homogenisation, based on a quotation from the first historian of Arab nationalism George Antonius: ‘the process of Arabization [has] three lasting results: the enthronement of Arabic as the national language, the introduction of Arab manners, and the implantation of an appreciable Arab stock in the racial soil.’[45] Under the guise of advocating for ‘heterogeneity-in-harmony’[46] and denouncing racism, Sayegh’s work perpetuated the essentialist conception of the nation already present in Saadeh’s analysis of the Syrian case.

In Zureiq’s work, as in Sayegh’s, an initial euphemisation of the Arab nationalist discourse developed during the war took place in the 40s and 50s: assent to fascism and Nazism obviously disappeared. But this euphemism was not without an accusatory inversion: it was now Israel that was accused of Nazism and racism. This reversal did not, however, prevent the persistence of conspiracy and eliminationist antisemitism, as well as a quasi-racial conception of the Arab people. While Zureiq and Sayegh did not yet speak of colonialism when referring to Zionism, the entire discursive infrastructure was

already in place: Zionists are Western (or at least exogenous and racist) invaders of a land held for millennia by the Arabs of Palestine, descendants of the region's indigenous peoples, including the ancient Hebrews.

A second stage of reformulation: Arab nationalism as part of an anti-colonial rhetoric

The strategy of accusatory inversion and euphemisation culminated in Sayegh's 1965 book, *Zionist Colonialism in Palestine*. This book was primarily intended for a Western audience and published in English. The discourse was profoundly reconfigured. It no longer included any positive mention of Nazism. The arguments aimed at establishing Arab nationalism primacy in the Middle East disappeared, along with the associated racial dimension. The antisemitic clichés of Christian anti-Judaism and conspiracy theorising about the occult power of the world's Jews were also discarded.

The advantage of the 'colonial' perspective is that it dispenses with the wobbly theories surrounding the Khazarian origin of Jewish migrants to Palestine, since all that's needed to turn Zionism into European colonialism is to associate it with European and then American imperialism:

Britain had prevailed upon a predominantly European League to endorse a programme of European Zionist colonisation in Palestine: The United States led a European-American majority to overrule the opposition of an Afro-Asian minority in the General Assembly, and to endorse the establishment of a colonial Zionist state in the Afro-Asian bridge, the Arab land of Palestine.[47].

This argument, however, only holds up at the price of a double inversion: firstly, denying any anti-colonial dimension to the State of Israel, and making the British the irreducible allies of the Zionist movement. Sayegh would hardly have uttered such a historical untruth in the late 1940s, after British aid to Arab armies in the 1948 war and Britain's abstention from the UN vote on the partition of Palestine and the creation of the State of Israel.

Nor is there any need for covertly racist foundations of the Arab Nation, when the evocation of the indigeneity of the Palestinian people and explicit references to South African apartheid are mobilised: 'The remnants of Palestine's Arabs who have continued to live in the Zionist settler-state since 1948 have their own "Bantustans", their "native reserves", their "Ghettos".[48]. Despite the historical evidence of multiple migrations and invasions into the Fertile Crescent, the Palestinian people are regarded as 'first', in order to confer on them the same kind of racial purity as in Saadeh's

developments on the Syrian people, albeit in a form acceptable to international opinion. The characterisation of Zionism as an ‘alien body in the region’[49] shows that, in Sayegh’s words, the assimilation of Judaism to that ‘mental illness’ that plagued Saadeh’s Syria is never far away.

A final reformulation: settler colonialist ideology

Having put European Jewish settlers face to face with indigenous Palestinians, all that remained for Sayegh to do was to characterise the type of colonialism he believed was unfolding in Palestine. Although intended to appeal to a left-leaning Western audience, his definition was markedly different from the Marxist understanding of the term, which linked it to imperialism and capitalist exploitation of colonised peoples: ‘The Zionist colonists were animated neither [...] by economic [nor] by politico-imperialist motives.’ [50]

Sayegh defined colonialism in a new way, adding what he called settler colonialism into the conceptual and political scene .[51] Stemming from the successive ideological reformulations of Arab nationalism in the 1930s, this ideological version of settler colonialism was destined to become one of the pillars of contemporary anti-Zionism. The book, published in 1965, was not linked to the situation of occupation created by the Six-Day War. It attacked the very legitimacy of Israel’s existence. For Sayegh, settler colonialism implied that the core of the Israeli national project was the ‘elimination’ of the Arabs of Palestine. This definition went far beyond the emerging meanings of the concept of settler colonialism at the time, which aimed to analyse the effects of the construction of nations by new arrivals on a colonial territory.[52]

Sayegh’s ideological use of the concept of settler colonialism made it possible to incorporate all the accusatory inversions mentioned above into the discourse of Arab nationalism. It was no longer the Arab nationalists who displayed an eliminationist antisemitism akin to that of the Nazis, but the Zionists who, like the Nazis, aimed to eliminate the Arabs: ‘The Zionist concept of the “final solution” to the “Arab problem” and the Nazi concept of the “final solution” to the “Jewish problem” essentially consist of the same basic ingredient: the elimination of the undesirable human element in question [...] Behind the difference in techniques lies an identity of objectives’. It was no longer Arab nationalists who were racist, but Zionists:

Racism is not an acquired trait of the Zionist settler state. Nor is it an accidental, passing feature of the Israeli scene. It is congenital, essential, and permanent. For it is inherent in the very ideology of Zionism and in the basic motivation for Zionist colonisation and statehood.[53]

These incriminations led to the accusations of ‘apartheid’ and of ethnic cleansing before their time: the Zionists ‘have expressed their fancied “supremacy” over the Arab “natives”, first, by isolating themselves from the Arabs in Palestine and, later on, by evicting the Arabs from their homeland’.[54] These accusations were hardly substantiated: Sayegh provided no statistics, legal or historical evidence to back them up. As for the recurring accusation of ‘elimination’, it did not even receive the beginnings of a demonstration.

The spread of settler colonialism ideology in universities, the New Left and international organisations

As we have seen, Zureiq and Sayegh were not only theoreticians, but also diplomats. Between 1945 and 1948, their discourse was aimed first at trying to prevent the creation of the State of Israel, then at undermining its legitimacy after the UN vote. As early as 1945, the Arab League set up Arab propaganda offices to combat the project of an independent Jewish state in Palestine. The focus was on the United States and the UN. Zureiq and Sayegh were part of this effort among a network of intellectuals from the American University of Beirut who maintained important contacts with Middle East specialists in American universities and in the State Department, all of whom were committed to the anti-Zionist cause.

However, despite the considerable sums invested by the Arab League, this propaganda campaign was a failure, because its content, as in Sayegh and Zureiq’s early texts, was still too imbued with antisemitism to reach American public opinion and because the embodiment of the Palestinian cause was still the pro-Nazi Mufti of Jerusalem in the immediate post-war period.[55] However, several strategic elements emerged that were to shape subsequent successes. Firstly, the very early idea of targeting American universities. The future Israeli ambassador to Washington, Eliahu Eilat (nee Epstein),[56] was concerned about it as early as 1947 and warned Jerusalem: ‘this is one of the most useful, from the long-range point of view of Arab propaganda efforts in this country, and at the same time one of the most dangerous to our interests.’ Secondly, the need to work within the framework of international organisations: ‘The Arab chances to succeed in the session of the General Assembly depend a lot on the extent of their activities in the spreading of propaganda in the corridors of the [...] UN.’[57]

After the setback of 1948, the Arab League reopened several offices in the United States whose work plan was drawn up by Fayed Sayegh. Considering the previous failure, he advised adapting communications to the American mindset rather than seeking to satisfy Arab opinion.[58] It was in line with this strategy of redefining the discourse aimed at international opinion that Zionist Colonialism in Palestine was written and published. After the Six-Day War, this strategy finally bore fruit, particularly among Black Power activists. A vade mecum written by Sayegh, *Do you know? Twenty Basic Facts about*

the Palestine Problem, was distributed to Black Power activists by the Arab Information Centre in New York. It was a short, 4-page book reiterating the main theses of Zionist Colonialism in Palestine.

The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), one of the main organisations of the civil rights movement in the '60s, reprinted it almost as it appeared in its newsletter at the time of the Six-Day War, augmenting it with photos (including one comparing Israeli war actions to those of the Nazis at Dachau) and antisemitic references to Rothschild rule in Africa. Later, the Black Panthers would inscribe their support for the Palestinian cause as part of the struggle against American colonialism. The Black Panther Party's ideological takeover of the notion of settler colonialism led to a further evolution of this ideology: it was now 'white settler colonialism'[59] that was evoked. This success with African American activists spread to the anti-colonial left as a whole, as well as to many countries in the Global South, notably South Africa.[60] This was even more of an ideological victory since black civil rights activists in the United States[61], as well as anti-apartheid activists in South Africa, were until the mid-1960s sympathetic to the state of Israel.[62]

This success was confirmed within international organisations, with a strong penetration of this discourse within the UN. Here again, the main architect was Fayed Sayegh. At the end of the Six-Day War, the USSR's representative at the UN took up Sayegh's arguments and compared Israel to 'Hitler's Germany', denouncing a supposed policy of 'extermination of the indigenous populations'. Within the Arab League, Sayegh was the driving force behind the famous UN resolution 3379 of 1975, which equated Zionism with 'a form of racism' and linked it to 'colonialism and apartheid'.

In the academic world, this ideological drift, initially marginal, gradually became the majority. The theory of settler colonialism has gradually structured itself into a field of study, that of settler colonialism studies[63] with Patrick Wolfe's 1990s work on Australian Aborigines especially influential. Wolfe progressively rallied to Sayegh's maximalist vision on the eliminationist dimension of settler colonialism: his articles published between 2006 and 2016 on Israel/Palestine relied more and more on Sayegh or on the work of Zureik's Institute for Palestine Studies. In *Traces of history: Elementary structures of race*, he quotes extensively from the Israeli 'new historians' Ilan Pappé, Gershon Shafir and Shlomo Sand, whose work, at its most ideological, has consisted in revising the history of Zionism in light of accusations of ethnic cleansing, apartheid, racism and even genocide.[64] In Patrick Wolfe, we find the same comparisons between Nazism and Zionism as in Zureiq and Sayegh: he speaks of 'Herrenvolk' (master race)[65] with regard to Israelis, of a situation comparable to the Warsaw Ghetto[66] and of 'goyim-rein zones' (Gentile-free zones).

Israel's place is central in this ideological drift of the discourse on settler colonialism, as the latest avatar of European colonialism[67] and as the only foreign body within formerly colonised countries.[68] The coloniser's elimination

(genocide) of indigenous peoples is a structural feature here, since according to Patrick Wolfe ‘invasion is a structure, not an event’.[69] Genocide need not be proven. The essentialist character of the notion of indigenous people is taken up in an acritical manner, without its racialist underpinnings being explored. The stage is thus set for this discourse on settler colonialism, purged of its fascist origins and all-too-direct antisemitism, to become a global ideology, accepted in academic circles, within the global left and international institutions. This ideology makes it possible to characterise any conflict as comprising radical opposites – one of which being genocidal – for which no compromise is ever possible. Such is the case between North and South, white peoples and peoples of colour, colonisers and natives, dominant and dominated. Within this structure, Israel and the Jews always occupy a place that is both decisive and negative.

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[1] Nordbruch 2009, p.74

[2] Nordbruch 2009, p.138

[3] Shattuck 2022, pp. 10,151

[4] Peters 1921, pp.268-294

[5] Saadeh's irredentism encompassed Sinai, Palestine, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and even the island of Cyprus"

[6] Nordbruch 2009, pp. 74-5

[7] Here we find conceptions very close to those developed by Gustave Le Bon, notably his concept of 'historical race', i.e. a mental constitution that is certainly historically acquired, but intangible (Nordbruch 2009, pp. 73-74).

[8] Payne 1996, p. 353

[9] Sa'adeh: 2016, pp. 23-6

[10] Voegelin 2008, pp. 135-171

[11] Nordbruch 2009, p. 76

[12] Zureiq 1939

[13] Nordbruch 2009, p. 77

[14] Zureiq 1939

[15] Gauchet 2011, pp. 187-192.

[16] Gentile 2006, pp. 119-173

[17] Zureiq 1939

[18] Nordbruch 2009, p. 83

[19] Nordbruch 2009, p 86

[20] Nordbruch 2009, p 111

[21] Beshara 2019, pp. 40,45

[22] Mallmann and Cüppers 2013

[23] Mallmann and Cüppers 2013, p. 49

[24] Perpetrated on June 1 and 2, 1941, this pogrom left between 150 and 180 Iraqi Jews dead and around 600 wounded.

[25] Mallmann and Cüppers 2013

[26] Zureiq 1956

[27] Sayegh 1958

[28] This is a speech delivered at the conference for Islamic-Christian dialogue in Aley, Lebanon in 1946, cited in Beshara 2019 and a lecture given by Faye兹 Sayegh at the School of International Relations (Heidelberg Evangelical and Reformed Church) in Philadelphia in 1950

[29] Sayegh 1965

[30] “If we assume for the sake of argument that the Jews had no hand in bringing about the persecution which has befallen them, that they in no way contributed to it, and that it was all the fault of other peoples, who then (italics added) is responsible for it and at whose expense should it be rectified?” Zureiq 1956, p.62.

[31] Zureiq 1956, p.61

[32] Lecture by Faye兹 Sayegh at the School of International Relations (Heidelberg Evangelical and Reformed Church) in Philadelphia in 1950

[33] Beshara 2019, p.48

[34] Zureiq 1956, p.5

[35] Beshara 2019, p.48

[36] Sayegh 1958, p.155

[37] Zureiq 1956, p.62

[38] Lecture by Fayed Sayegh at the School of International Relations (Heidelberg Evangelical and Reformed Church) in Philadelphia in 1950.

[39] Harkabi 2017, p.176

[40] Zureiq 1956, p.15

[41] Zureiq 1956, p.60

[42] Shapira 2009

[43] Sand 2008

[44] Zureiq 1956, p.61

[45] Sayegh 1958, p.52

[46] Sayegh 1958, p.87

[47] Sayegh 1965, p.16

[48] Sayegh 1965, pp. 28-29

[49] Sayegh 1965, p.19

[50] Sayegh 1965, p.4

[51] Sayegh uses the terms ‘settler-state’, ‘settler-regime’, ‘settler-community’ and ‘settler-minority’

[52] In a text published in *Les Temps Modernes* in 1967, Maxime Rodinson’s ‘*Israël, fait colonial*’, Rodinson identifies Zionism with settler-colonialism as a European ideology, with a pro-assimilation point of view that denies any historical legitimacy to the existence of the Jewish people, but also recognizes the Jewish presence in Israel as a *fait accompli*. Rodinson rejects any demonization of Zionism, and accusations of genocide and apartheid are notoriously absent from his work. Writing in *Le Monde* about his article published before the Six-Day War, Pierre Vidal-Naquet shows its strengths, but also its weaknesses: ‘In any case, we must do M. Rodinson justice. Rodinson, that he strives to deprive the word ‘colonization’ of its passionate charge by showing that if there is colonization, it is in the sense that the United States is a colony, with the enormous difference that the Arabs have not been exterminated, and that in Israel it is not a question of ‘exploiting native labor’. The deeper meaning of the movement lies elsewhere: there must be, said Golda Meir, somewhere a land where Jews are the majority.’

[53] Sayegh 1965, p.36, p.21

[54] Sayegh 1965, p.24

[55] Rickenbacher 2020, pp.1-25

[56] Eliahu Epstein, who was then in charge of Jewish Agency activities in the United States, paradoxically had many contacts with the intellectuals in charge of Arab League propaganda. An Orientalist and alumnus of the American University of Beirut, he had maintained friendly relations with many of them.

[57] Rickenbacher 2020, pp.1-25

[58] Sayegh 1958

[59] Fischbach 2020, p.3

[60] Lubotzky 2023

[61] Alahmed 2020, pp.28-48

[62] Lubotzky 2023

[63] Shoemaker 2015, pp. 29-30

[64] Ilan Troen's critique of their work is crucial here. (Troen 2021, pp. 195-207)

[65] Wolfe 2016, p.345

[66] Wolfe 2006, pp.387-409

[67] Kauanui 2012, pp.235-258

[68] Rivlin 1976, pp.325-360

[69] Wolfe 2006, pp.387-409